

Department of Sociology, University of Dhaka, believes that if we cannot ensure a fair, public-welfare-oriented education system, this unemployed, frustrated youth can be a great threat to society. "In a society where a person is judged on the basis of the job he or she has, isn't it frustrating if that person does not have a job? Such frustration, at one point of time, leads many to engage in social disorders," he explains

The skills gap

On the subject of the state of our current tertiary education system, Abdul Mannan, Chairman of the Bangladesh University Grants Commission (UGC), says, "In developing curricula for job driven courses, there is no mechanism in place to have inputs from the industry or the employers in our universities. In such cases students may be spending their time and effort learning things no employer needs."

For example, there are 400,000 foreigners working in Bangladesh siphoning off USD 5 billion annually. Mannan opines, "The only reason local employers employ foreigners is because they have the right type of education, skill and attitude." At a roundtable at *The Daily Star* titled Closing the Skills Gap, industry leaders and employers expressed similar feelings. "It is ironic that many of our graduates are looking for jobs, while we in the garment industry are struggling to find talent with the requisite skills to fill available positions," says Faruque Hassan, Senior Vice-President of Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association.

Syed Nasim Manzur, president of the Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industry, on the other hand supported meaningful on-the-job placements such as internships and called for de-emphasising non-technical types of business education at the undergraduate level, terming it an absolute waste of time. "We have to get people back to the Sciences, English, Mathematics and Philosophy. Unfortunately, most universities in Bangladesh are in the big business of churning out graduates instead of creating knowledge," he remarks.

But the issue of imparting the right kind of knowledge is pervasive throughout all levels of education, and central to this discussion of harnessing the potential of our youth bulge is literacy. Although industrial development has not yet reached a point where it can absorb great numbers of working populations, 40 percent of the working-age population is illiterate, which renders them unable to secure decent work even if they do manage to secure employment, whether at home or abroad.

As a study by the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies reveals, even among the top nine revenue-generating sectors (agro-food, construction, health, hospitality and tourism, ICT, leather goods, light engineering, ready-made garments and ship building), the skills gap is harrowing. The study found that the existing skill gap is the highest in the agro-food sector, followed by RMG. Skills gap for "skilled workers" in the IT sector is also high (40 percent) as demand there is mainly for highly skilled labour. The

According to the latest figures by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), around two million youths of working age are unemployed. Like Hena, young university graduates are struggling the most to secure employment.

projected total training needed for these nine sectors is over four million in 2021, and yet, Bangladesh Technical Education Board (BTEB) currently serves only 500,000 trainees each year, while another half million is served mostly by NGOs and private providers.

Employing our graduates

31-year-old Hafijur Rahman Masum, who completed his Diploma in Electrical and Electronic Engineering in 2010 and his Bachelor's in the same subject from a private university in 2015, had almost the

same experience as Hena while looking for a job. "I appeared in many government exams, and tried for the private companies too. Since most of the employers look for experienced candidates, I failed to find the right position for me," says Masum. "Although I worked in a private project for eight months, it was different from my educational expertise, and I become jobless right after the project ended," he adds.

According to a 2012 report of University Grants Commission, every year around three million students from public and private universities complete their undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. Mujibul Haque Chunnu, the State Minister for Labour and Employment Ministry, believes that the unemployment rate is higher for those from the general education stream because the government does not have enough job opportunities for millions of graduates.

However, after analysing the Ministry of Public Administration's data for the month of December 2016, it was found that as many as 3,02,904 government jobs, or 18 percent of total government jobs in Bangladesh, are lying vacant every year, even though the rate of unemployment is on the rise. "I do not agree with the data since we have no permanent vacancies," claims Chunnu. "Since, every year, a large number of government employees retire and we have to fill up some posts, a large number of vacancies are created. Also, the whole recruitment process needs time—sometimes one or two years to complete the formalities like forming committees, creating the advertising,

taking applications from the candidates, scrutinising them, sending interview cards, taking preliminary or written exams and viva, publishing the final results and much more," he explains.

The minister also informs that since job opportunities are higher in the vocational and technical education system, as evidenced by the fact that unemployment rate amongst those with secondary education or post-secondary non-tertiary education (6.2 percent) is significantly lower than those with tertiary education, the government is currently trying to inspire students to pursue technical and vocational education to increase overall productivity. "Along with BTEB, we are giving registration to thousands of private technical institutes and creating an 'internationally accepted' syllabus with the education ministry, on behalf of the National Skill Development Council. This way, the institutions are maintaining standards with the public training institutes and students are getting the scope to develop their skills," he explains.

According to ABM Khorshed Alam, Chief Executive Officer of the National Skill Development Council, the authority in charge of monitoring all sorts of skill development programmes in Bangladesh, there are 35 departments from 22 ministries working on skill development, from driving automobiles, beauty and skin care, ICT, construction, glasswork, to home services, and much more.

The last labour survey conducted by BBS in 2013 made it abundantly clear how Bangladesh is lagging behind in terms of jobs in the secondary sector. Agriculture generates 47 percent of jobs, and service 37 percent, but industrial and manufacturing sectors continue to provide fewer jobs at only 14 percent, even though sectors like garments, telecom, pharmaceuticals, shipbuilding, and so on, are experiencing robust growth.

"Since the number of industries is not sufficient in Bangladesh and the investment for building new industries is not satisfactory, we cannot create more vacancies for our unemployed youth. Currently, besides developing the skills, we should focus on creating the service scopes simultaneously," admits Alam. So even putting the skills gap aside, there does not seem to be any solution in sight for the dilemma of labour supply continuing to outstrip demand, as there are simply not enough jobs either.

In regards to the lack of jobs for the youth, macroeconomist and public policy analyst Debapriya Bhattacharya had commented, "They must be encouraged to become entrepreneurs, instead of focusing only on serving others and the necessary financing facilities should be ensured for them." If we are to truly develop our burgeoning youth population, it is imperative not only to expand and enrich our industrial and manufacturing sector to generate more opportunities, but we must introduce leadership and entrepreneurship programmes in secondary schools and training institutes, and facilitate investment for our young people's endeavours so that they can become the force that propels our nation forward.



IMAGE: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO